

# Committee on Resources

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## THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

TESTIMONY OF JAY THOMAS WATSON, CALIFORNIA/NEVADA REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY,

REGARDING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE YOSEMITE VALLEY PLAN, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION, AND PUBLIC LANDS SUBCOMMITTEE,

YOSEMITE VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

APRIL 22, 2003.

Chairman Radanovich, members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to join you here today in this Incomparable Valley. You have picked quite a location for this hearing -- Half Dome as a backdrop, the sound of water rushing over Yosemite Falls – it is indeed a pleasure to present testimony on behalf of The Wilderness Society on the implementation of the landmark Yosemite Valley Plan.

It is hard to believe that it has been more than six years since the floodwaters of the Merced River passed through Yosemite Valley. While the 1997 flood caused a lot of damage, disrupting the lives and economic well-being of local residents and businesses, as well as the expectations of park visitors, there was a silver lining to the storm clouds that produced those floods – a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform into reality what had long been a grand, but elusive vision for Yosemite.

Realizing that vision has indeed been elusive since it has been 23 years since it was first articulated to the American people in the 1980 General Management Plan for Yosemite National Park. The vision is captured in five key goals:

Reclaim priceless natural beauty

Allow natural processes to prevail

Promote visitor understanding and enjoyment

Markedly reduce traffic congestion

Reduce crowding

In other words, a more natural Yosemite, where hydrological and other natural process operate freely, a Yosemite with less asphalt, fewer automobiles, less development, less congestion, a Yosemite with an improved and enhanced visitor experience.

Fortunately, the National Park Service seized upon the opportunity presented by the floods by launching a three-year planning process that culminated in the adoption of the Yosemite Valley Plan and the Merced River Plan. Intellectual honesty, rigorous analysis, and extensive and open public participation characterized these planning processes. At the end of the trail, on a bright but chilly November day, the Final Yosemite Valley Plan was formally announced by then Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt.

It is important to note that more than 10,000 comments were received on the Yosemite Valley Plan. In addition to public comments, the planning process was characterized by 18 public hearings and meetings in 18 locations and cities, regularly scheduled on-the-ground tours led by Park Service staff, written planning updates and newsletters, and extensive media coverage.

In other words, the Final Yosemite Valley Plan was the product of a comprehensive, open, and honest process that offered unprecedented opportunities and avenues for public review and input. To this day, the Park Service and the planning team deserves credit and applause, not only for the process they undertook,

but also for the product they developed as well.

The Final Yosemite Valley Plan was duly adopted through a signed Record of Decision dated December 29, 2000. On that day, the National Park Service bestowed a gift upon Yosemite Valley. Moreover, on that day, the Park Service showed that it had struck an elegant balance between protecting Yosemite's natural and cultural resources and providing for visitor use and enjoyment of a popular national park.

Accordingly, The Wilderness Society is pleased to see the Park Service moving forward with vigorously implementing the Yosemite Valley Plan. We support the projects currently moving forward – particularly the Yosemite Falls Project, the Cascades Dam Project, the acquisition of clean fuel shuttle vehicles, and the restoration to natural habitat of the area currently known as Upper and Lower River Campgrounds.

I would also like to state clearly that The Wilderness Society is unalterably opposed to reopening the plan to changes, particularly in the area of campgrounds, parking, and transportation.

With respect to Upper and Lower River Campgrounds, the habitat restoration opportunities presented there not only are the single largest restoration component of the entire plan, they also would restore some of the most biologically productive habitat types found in Yosemite Valley – riparian, wet meadow, and Black oak.

With respect to the proposed reduction and centralization of day-use parking to a 500-space lot at Camp Six, please understand that this also a vital component of the Final Yosemite Valley Plan and is of elemental importance if congestion is to be reduced in Yosemite Valley. It is not only an answer to those handful of days when gridlock is achieved, it is also an answer to the countless number of days during the visitor season when automobile congestion, while short of absolute gridlock, renders a visit to Yosemite Valley an exercise in frustration.

Indeed, habitat restoration and transportation changes are indeed the heart and soul of the Valley Plan. Neither must be compromised or undermined.

In adopting the final plan, the Park Service also showed its responsiveness to public comment by making significant changes in moving from draft to final. Two issues that continue to be hot topics perhaps best demonstrate this responsiveness -- campgrounds and lodging.

Under the final plan, there would be 500 campsites in the valley. Assuming a two-night stay, that is enough for 30,000 families or groups of friends to camp out over a four-month summer camping season. Add in the 1,065 other campsites within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park, and there is enough for a total of 94,000 camping opportunities during a four-month period.

But the Park Service isn't proposing to stop there, the agency has found a way to locate another 204 sites in the park, yet outside the valley – boosting total family camping opportunities to 106,140 two-night stays over a four month period.

Similarly, in direct response to public comment, the Park Service restructured the mix of total overnight opportunities in Yosemite to emphasize accommodations at the lower end of the cost scale.

Under the final plan, there will be a total of 1,461 total overnight accommodations in Yosemite Valley. Out of this total, 1,179 are campsites, rustic tent cabins, and economy-scale cabins, or 81 percent of all overnight accommodations. Only 282 beds so to speak, or 19 percent would be at the upper cost levels.

In other words, the Park Service has more than adequately found a way to accommodate camping and low cost overnight accommodations in Yosemite. While we support this effort, we will vigorously oppose any modifications to the Yosemite Valley Plan to increase camping any further in Yosemite Valley.

It is time to realize that Yosemite Valley is a finite place. Over the years, far too much development and infrastructure was crammed into the valley. The Yosemite Valley Plan sought to reverse that trend. It is exciting to see it being implemented.

But more work needs to be done. In addition to the implementation activities currently underway, I would like to touch on several other efforts that must be started sooner, rather than later.

As I mentioned earlier, changes in transportation and parking are vital to the success of the Valley Plan and to the future of Yosemite. Staffing assignments, pre-planning activities, and up-front analysis, and

sequencing of decision-making must be initiated now to facilitate a smooth transition to centralized parking and reduced day-use parking.

Similarly, with the help of this committee, the National Park Service must see its authorities expanded by legislation to enable fuller engagement in the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System or YARTS. While the Valley Plan is not dependent on YARTS, the success of YARTS could significantly reduce overall implementation costs. Several factors are converging during the next few years that will increase ridership on YARTS – the ramping up of UC-Merced, employees moving out of Yosemite Valley into surrounding communities, reduced day-use parking in the Valley, and the increased activities of the UC Merced/Sierra Nevada Research Station.

YARTS was a homegrown idea that continues to deserve support. To this day, I applaud Mariposa, Merced, and Mono Counties for having the courage of their convictions to stick with YARTS. Their belief that local, state, and federal governments can work together to solve a common problem or serve a shared purpose is an inspiration. And yet, additional funding is needed through TEA III legislation, as are additional Park Service authorities similar to what the agency has at Zion National Park.

Because of the Park Service's success in developing the Yosemite Valley Plan and the Merced River Plan, the future of Yosemite is bright. Think about it, in just a short time, an unsightly and dangerous dam will be removed from the Wild and Scenic Merced River, a parking lot removed and the Lower Yosemite Falls area restored and made accessible to people with disabilities so they can feel the spray of Yosemite Falls in their faces, the clean fuel shuttle fleet expanded, congestion relieved, and one day soon, vital habitat restored along the Merced River.

There is much to cheer about. There is much to be thankful for. And there are people in the National Park Service who are true heroes of public service. Some of them continue to work at Yosemite, some have moved on to other parks like Fort Clatsop, Channel Islands, and Mt. Lassen Volcanic.

Wherever they are, the folks who produced this plan should be fiercely proud of their accomplishment. I am pleased to see the Park Service embrace and implement the plan. On behalf of The Wilderness Society, I ask that the Park Service, with the full support of this committee, do even more by acting now on the tasks necessary to realize the full promise of the Valley Plan -- promises that will only be realized when the full Yosemite Valley Plan is implemented, not just those components represented by the fifteen or so projects currently under way.

It has been 23 years since the National Park Service set forth a majestic vision for Yosemite and saw it embraced by the American people. Yosemite's time has come. Let's get the job done and done right as set forth in the Final Yosemite Valley Plan. Thank you.